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ABSTRACT

In 1980, Midwestern State University (Texas), a typical college in several respects, held a series of panel discussions aimed at making students aware of the practicality and applicability of language study. Originally conceived as a "work fair" that would help recruit English majors, exigencies of a changing academic situation and the English department's incorporation into a department of humanities, languages, and literature forced a change in focus to the importance of language study in general. Because the program was scheduled during regular class time, panel discussions were chosen as the most effective means of increasing student interest. Midwestern State University graduates in a wide variety of fields--psychiatric nurse practitioner; writer, producer, narrator of films; police officer; and others--described how language skills were important in their careers. Although it is impossible to ascribe to the program any causal relation, in the fall following the number of English majors at the university increased 24%. (JL)

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"Language in the World of Work"

Jeff H. Campbell

Even though Wichita Falls, Texas, has been designated an All-American City for 1981-82, it is not generally considered among America's trend-setting cities. And even though Midwestern State University's soccer team ended the season ranked number two in the nation, our university is not generally among those polled to determine the state of various sections of academe. Nevertheless, Wichita Falls and MSU are in many ways typical of both mid-America and a large number of small state universities. We usually reflect the trends in American higher education about as well as anyone, even though we may not start those trends.

As early as 1974, for instance, the MSU Department of English came to grips with the fact that our carefully-reasoned freshman English program was beautifully suited to students of the late sixties, but almost hopelessly out of tune with the students we were getting in the mid-seventies. We set about a re-structuring of our freshman curriculum which led first to a change in content and method, then to the addition of a required writing lab for poorer students, and finally in 1979 to the institution of a semester of "Introduction to College Composition" for those who could not pass our diagnostic test. Teachers from almost every college represented at this CEA convention could probably fill in the details of that process from their own experiences. My point here is simply to prove that Wichita Falls and MSU do in many ways reflect the common national experience, even if we are somewhat off the beaten track.

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From 1974 to 1979 I served as chairman of the Department of English at Midwestern. Smugly I reported the number of our English majors and minors to South Central CEA investigators who were reporting rather striking declines in the ranks of such majors and minors at other colleges. Our numbers were holding up rather well. I credited the outstanding quality and the scintillating personalities of our faculty for our staying power, along with the well-established traditional liberal arts emphasis of our college. Nevertheless, having noted that the linguistic decline among freshmen had hit us just as it had hit everyone else, I had uneasy moments, and developed in my mind a projected "Work Fair" in which representatives from various areas of the work world would be present to show our students how practical and necessary a degree in English was--how many doors other than those to the teaching of English it would open. I even appointed a committee to begin making plans for the event, with myself as chairman.

But along came a revision of our core curriculum, the decennial institutional self-study, retirements, tenure denials, replacements, denials of money for replacements--and other administrative problems too numerous to mention and too time-consuming to allow for such tangential matters as a work fair. So I never even called a meeting of the committee!

All of a sudden, it is 1980. I am in my second year away from the onerous duties of the chairmanship, the decline in majors and minors has hit us--we cannot escape it as we note the slim enrollment in upper division and graduate classes and must face a tough cost-conscious administration which says small classes are not efficient. Yes, as before, we are

affected by the same cultural forces which affect everyone else. And across my desk comes the always-insightful, often stimulating, sometimes even maddening CEA Forum. In the December, 1980, issue, Hal Blythe, Charles Latta and Charlie Sweet describe an "English Career Day" at Eastern Kentucky University. The program was on a much larger scale than what I had thought of four years ago, but with many similarities and with some ways of approach that might overcome some of the problems that prevented me from seriously pursuing my earlier idea.

With enthusiasm and high hopes that I had perhaps found a way to make the world safe for English Departments, I took the article to my new department chairman and asked him to read it and see if he thought it might hold some promise for us. He read it, liked it, and said, "It sounds great--if you will do it." Now I realized why I had never gotten this project off the ground when I was chairman--but agreed to see what I could do.

The first step, of course, was to enlist the cooperation of all the members of the department, so I took advantage of the first department meeting of the spring semester to explain the general idea of a program that would bring to the campus representatives from the working world who would share with our students the relevance to their professions of the skills the students were learning in English classes. The primary aim of the program would be to provide the basis for a hard sell on the values of an English major--or if not a major, certainly an English minor to support almost any major. My explanation of the general idea was met with interest, but two major adjustments had to be made in my plan.

To begin with, there is no longer an English Department at MSU, but rather a Department of Humanities, Languages, and Literature. Practically, that means that foreign language teachers are now in the same department with English teachers. Since foreign languages have been hit even harder than English by the decline in students--at MSU majors in French and German have actually been discontinued--the foreign language teachers were quite interested in a plan which might increase student interest in their subjects. But I had presented a plan to gain more English majors! Very quickly the plan expanded to include all language and literature areas, not just English.

Second, my general plan utilized an idea from the Forum article to solve what had been one of the major problems that had prevented my earlier action on the "work fair" idea. That idea was to schedule the program during regular class hours and assure a good audience for the program by having teachers take their classes to differing presentations at different hours. That meant that absolutely all the teachers in the department must agree to support the program by giving up one session of each of their classes at some point during the semester. The professors agreed to that condition as long as they could be convinced that the program would really be worthwhile--but some of the more politically astute members pointed out that other departments in the university might frown on our taking captive audiences from required courses in order to proselytize new majors and minors. Would this be legitimate use of class time? Would we think it were legitimate if the sociology department or the physical education department used required classes out of the core

curriculum to recruit majors? Would the administration approve such a gimmick? Well, we had to answer no to all those questions, but we were not willing to let go of what most of the department was now beginning to feel was a good idea.

With contributions from just about everybody in the department--from the ex-dean to the new teaching assistant--the discussion went something like this: Every student in first and second year English and foreign language courses is meeting some kind of requirement. Is this requirement justified? Why should the university make students take these courses? Most students probably do not see much if any sense in what they are doing--these courses are just additional hurdles put before them, distasteful necessities on their way to degrees in some major or other--but not English or foreign language. If we can help these students, we said, to see that these required courses are indeed important to their everyday functioning in the world of work, no matter what that work might be, then perhaps we can improve their motivation in our courses and increase the amount of learning that goes on in those courses. Now if it just happens that a few of them along the way see that English or Spanish might be a good major, or that English or Spanish or French or German just might be a good minor--well, we certainly won't object. Our main purpose, however, will be the promotion of a new sense of the practicality, even the necessity, of our required courses along with the additional understanding that there just might be real value in additional courses in languages. The focus was thus expanded from English to language study in general, and the purpose was shifted from the

crass recruitment of English majors to sly consciousness-raising concerning the practicality and applicability of language study. Three members of the department, two English teachers and a Spanish teacher, volunteered to work with me as the committee, the department gave its assurances of cooperation, and we were on our way.

Our first plan was to have all MWF classes and all TTh classes participate in the program, which we soon found ourselves calling a seminar. The idea was to have a panel of professionals from various work areas to speak briefly about the relevance of writing and reading to their particular job areas, and then have time for the students to visit with these people and others representing major employers in our community at booths around the room. We ran immediately into two problems: the facility we needed was not available for all day use on any consecutive Monday and Tuesday for the rest of the spring. We decided to settle on a Monday, since we had more students in the MWF sequence than the TTh sequence, and we hoped at least some of the TTh students might come at one of the open hours on Monday. Then, as we proceeded with plans, we realized that we really had only 50 minutes for our program, since students would have to be going on to other classes. Furthermore, by the time we really got people in and seated, we'd be lucky to have 45 minutes. Could we present a panel discussion and have time for approximately 200 students in each group to mill around and visit booths? We decided not, so out the window went the booth idea. We'd stick simply to a panel presentation.

Now, who did we want to be on the panel? Our first idea was to limit the panel to our own graduates--in English or foreign languages--

who were now working in widely varying vocations. We began compiling a list of our graduates, and we came up with a very impressive list of occupations--for which English and language majors are apparently qualified, since these people were successfully earning their livings at them. But many of these people were far from Wichita Falls, and we had no expense money to bring them back for a visit to Alma Mater. Again we compromised. We settled on five MSU graduates--a psychiatric nurse practitioner, a writer/producer/narrator of films, a police officer, and a community action corporation director, all of whom worked in Wichita Falls, and a systems engineer who agreed to drive up from Dallas. To that list we added the vice president of one of the largest manufacturing plants in town, the general manager of another, a political party county chairman, and a technical writer. Our committee brainstormed several times to get the lists from which we worked, and we divided the responsibility of securing the participating panelists. Then we carefully worked out a list of typical questions for the panelists to think about in advance.

In the mean time, we were planning our approach to the students. We spent a lot of time developing a brochure to hand to students as they came in. We decided to call the symposium "Language in the World of Work," so our Spanish professor designed a simple but effective logo with that title written over a map of the world. We worked out a three-fold design, with the title and general information on the front fold, the list of participants on the first inside fold, and a reprint of an article from the Wichita Falls paper about a symposium of business

leaders who agreed that liberal arts graduates were good prospective employees on the second and third inner folds. Under the article we listed thirty-six different occupations currently held by MSU graduates in English or foreign languages. The back two folds were taken up by a montage of classified ads taken from Houston and Dallas papers showing jobs for which knowledge of foreign language was prerequisite. The brochure was attractive, simple, inexpensive, and effective. (I will have copies to hold up to illustrate--and a few to distribute to anyone interested.)

Most English classes are held in the building where the panel discussion was to be presented, so most English teachers opted not to tell their students what was going to happen on the special Monday, but just take them down to the auditorium when the time came. Most of us felt that if we told students in advance that there was to be a special presentation that day, many would simply skip that day. Foreign language teachers could not follow this plan, however, because their classes are held all the way across the campus from the auditorium. Their students were told on Friday to report to the auditorium on Monday. Tuesday-Thursday classes were told of the event on Thursday and urged to come at one of the hours on Monday morning.

Most students were somewhat puzzled when they found themselves hustled off to the auditorium that Monday morning, but most of them were pleased at the change of pace, and almost all of them responded with interest to what they heard. We had presentations at 8, 9, 10, and 11 a.m., and although each presentation covered generally the same ideas, each presentation was unique. The big corporation executives spoke convincingly of the importance of communications skills for any success in

their businesses; the police officer was impressive in his uniform--and he not only recited the Miranda law in flawless Spanish, but he also made it clear that Spanish is important to anyone in the criminal justice system and that writing is absolutely vital. The nurse practitioner and the community action director added arguments for the importance of the insights gained from literature. The technical writer, film writer-producer, and political party chairman suggested other ways in which language was important and useful.

The panel was well received, and most of our teachers took advantage of the opportunity to follow up with discussion at their next class meetings. Students were generally impressed, gained a renewed interest in what they were doing in class--and, as we had hoped, many expressed interest in an English major or minor. Most had never even thought of the possibility of an English minor or a foreign language minor, and many now began to see possibilities there.

There is, of course, no way to measure the actual effect of a program such as this. Response seemed good. People were enthusiastic. We believe it's worth trying again. Statistics on the number of English majors at our university are notoriously unreliable. The computer thinks some people are English majors who long ago went to psychology. But then it still lists as political science majors several who have shifted to English--the story is a familiar one. But, for whatever they are worth, we get the figures each year. I certainly do not claim that our symposium on "Language in the World of Work" was the only factor, but the number of English majors at Midwestern State University this fall is 24% higher than it was last fall.

At least we seem to have been doing some things right--and we think this symposium was one of those things, you might adopt this basically simple idea to your own situation.

- Jeff H. Campbell
Midwestern State University